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ABSTRACT

In a study of how primary teachers assign and monitor independent reading seatwork (workbook) activities, 12 first, second, and third grade teachers were observed during their scheduled reading periods. The seven major observation categories were (1) to whom assigned, (2) when assigned, (3) materials, (4) material focus, (5) instructions for learning, (6) student behavior, and (7) teacher behavior. All of the observed teachers used a basal reader and accompanying workbook in their reading instruction. The results indicated that half the teachers frequently gave the assignments to the whole class, suggesting that seatwork is essentially a management device to keep students quiet. They also assigned seatwork before the reading lesson, which may be to reinforce skills from a previous lesson. Few teachers used written directions and none used an assignment sheet. Only six teachers provided students with the purposes for completing an activity, and only one teacher provided practice examples on a frequent basis. All of the teachers required students to work at seats by themselves, and only four teachers circulated around the room to assist students who had questions. In contradicting previous literature on assignment and supervision of reading seatwork, these results suggest that teachers need to provide students with meaningful purposes for the learning tasks, illustrate and practice the assigned task with them and supervise more closely their success with these tasks in order to make them effective. (HTH)

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Assignment and Supervision of Students' Reading Seatwork: Looking in on Twelve Primary Teachers' Classrooms

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Assignment and Supervision of Reading Seatwork: Looking In on Twelve Primary Teacher Classrooms

The predominant use of seatwork activities in the form of workbook type assignments, which either accompany the basal series, are commercially prepared, or are teacher-made has been documented in several observation studies in elementary classrooms (Durkin, 1974, 1984; Mason, 1983). Some attempts have been made to explore the use of such materials in terms of how well their content matches group reading instruction lessons and their overall quality (Durkin, 1974; Osborn, 1983); however, little information is available about how teachers assign and monitor independent seatwork tasks in their reading instruction. Do they provide for individual differences by differentiating assignments? Do teachers help students understand the activities and increase their chances of successfully completing the task independently? Is the amount of time for completion of the activities appropriate to students' capabilities?

Seatwork Type Tasks

A major instructional component used in most elementary reading programs is independent seatwork activities. These independent seatwork tasks are usually in the form of workbook type activities,such as students' writing responses in commercially prepared materials (workbooks and worksheets) or in teacher-made materials. There are two major issues related to

independent workbook type tasks. One is the concern for the content of the tasks, the other is for the quality of instruction used with seatwork tasks. Osborn (1983) in an analysis of several popular workbooks identified them as "forgotten children;" indicating that they have both good and bad points. If teachers are aware of these good and bad points do they attempt to address the bad points of seatwork type activities in their instruction. That is, do teachers use quality instruction to maximize the benefits of independent seatwork tasks in their reading program? This is the question that we used to guide our observations of what twelve primary teachers did in the assignment and monitoring of their students' seatwork tasks.

Present Study

Research findings in the areas of comprehension and teacher effectiveness support the use of instructional strategies to enhance the quality of instruction and students' learning. Examples of these include giving students purposes for completing their work, using practice examples so students understand how to complete the task, and providing a balance between comprehension and decoding instruction (Anderson, 1981; Brown, Campoine and Day, 1981; Duffy, 1982; Durkin, 1984). Research findings from these two areas of inquiry were used to specify categories of observation for teachers' assignment and monitoring of students' seatwork.

To understand how primary teachers assign and monitor independent reading activities, twelve primary grade teachers were observed during their reading instruction. These twelve

teachers were observed by their respective student teachers. First, second, and third grade teachers were each observed a minimum of seven times weekly during their scheduled reading periods. The average length of each observation was twenty minutes. Observations were conducted over a seven week period in the Spring of 1984, using an observation system that focused on teacher and student behaviors related to seat work. All twelve student teachers were trained in the use of the observation system prior to the beginning of student teaching. There were eight major observation categories: **To Whom Assigned, When Assigned, Materials, Material Focus, Instructions for Learning, Student Behavior**, and **Teacher Behavior.**

Data were collected during each observation by recording what the teacher did in assigning seatwork and what the students did in completing the assignment. All of the observed teachers used a basal reader and its accompanying workbook in their reading instruction. Each observation was dated and the teacher identified by school, grade level, and the number of the observation period was noted.

Findings

Observation data for each teacher were summarized over the seven observations. Percentages were then computed for each sub-category of the major behaviors and events under observation. The percentages that indicated a behavior or event was present seventy percent or more of the time were identified as a predicatable occurrence, percentages ranging from below seventy to forty were deemed to be less predictable in their occurrence,

and percentages below forty were identified as predictable in not being likely to be evidenced. This data summary allowed us to look at the probability of specific behaviors or events being used by primary grade teachers in their assigment and monitoring of reading seat-work tasks. For example, if a teacher assigned seatwork tasks in the basal reader workbook eighty-five percent of the time; then, it was assumed that on a given school day there was a high probability that this behavior would be demonstrated by this teacher. Similar assupmtions for the probability of behaviors and events were made for less predictable behaviors and predictable non-occurring behaviors.

Findings

A summary of the frequency of behaviors and events for the seven observations is presented in Table 1. Behaviors and events are presented in terms of their frequency of occurrence. Both frequent and absent behaviors could be considered to be more predictable in the primary teachers' classrooms that we sampled. A brief discussion of the findings follows.

To Whom Assigned. We were interested in finding out if primary teachers differentiated the assignment of seatwork to individual students, groups, and the whole class. Table 1 points out that none of these teachers assigned seatwork tasks to individual students. Only teacher 1.3 was observed to differentiate seatwork assignments between reading groups and the whole class. Five of the remaining eleven teachers gave

assignments to groups and six teachers were observed to assign the whole class the same seatwork activity.

When Seatwork Assignment Was Given. Combining the information in this category with that in **To Whom the Assignment Was Given** reveals some interesting findings. All six teachers who gave assignments to the whole class made the assignment before the reading lesson. Those teachers who gave seatwork assignments to the reading groups varied in when they gave assignments. Teachers 3.2 and 3.3 made the assignment during the reading lesson, and teacher 2.1 after the lesson. Teachers 1.4 and 3.1. were less predictable in giving assignments (one either before or during the lesson, and one either after or during the reading lesson). The one teacher (1.3) who made both group and whole class assignments either made the seatwork assignment before teaching the lesson or during the teaching of the lesson.

How Assigned As can be noted in Table 1, none of the observed teachers used an assignment sheet to assign a seatwork activity to students. Teacher 1.2 wrote out for the students what their assignment was for seatwork. The predominent procedure that was used for giving students their seatwork assignments was stating it verbally. Teachers 1.1, 2.2, and 3.3 provided illustrations when giving assignments verbally. Teacher 2.3 was noted to vary in this area; sometimes only giving a verbal assignment and other times using examples in conjuction with verbal assignments.

Materials The kinds of materials that teacher assigned for seatwork tasks was of interest to us. As can be seen in Table 1, teacher 1.1 used one kind of material for students' seatwork.

Teachers 2.2, 2.3, and 3.3 assigned students to complete seatwork in books, which were either the basal reader or trade books. Eight of the twelve teachers used predominantly workbooks or ditto sheets for their students.

Material Focus We were interested in identifying whether or not teachers relied heavily on word attack activities for their independent assignments. Teachers 1.5, 1.6, 2.3, and 3.1 were observed to use word attack activities for students' seat-work. Teachers 1.1 and 3.3 used activity assignments focusing on comprehension. The remaining teachers were noted to assign seatwork that dealt with both word attack and comprehension.

Assignment Instructions for Learning How teachers made their assignments for seatwork activites was of considerably interest to us. We wanted to find out if instructions were given that would maximize students success in the task. Specifically, were students given purposes for completing the task; practice examples to help them understand the task; and directions for time to complete the activity, how to get assistance if they had problems, and how to hand-in their completed work.

Seven of the twelve teachers gave either a verbal or written purpose to their students about the purpose of the activity. All of the three teachers who gave verbal purposes also indicated that the seatwork assignment would be graded. One of the three teachers who gave written purposes identified grading as purposes for the activities. An additional three teachers stated in some assignment instructions that the activity would be graded. Teacher 2.1 frequently used practice examples with the students

to help them understand how to complete their assigned activities. Teacher 1.1 infrequently used practice examples. For the remaining 10 teachers, the use of practice examples was a non-occurring behavior.

Giving students an estimate of how much time they had to complete their seatwork was a frequent behavior for teachers 1.1, 2.2, and 3.1. Teacher 2.1 would occassionally help students' monitor their time by telling them how much time they had to complete a task at their seats. The remaining eight teachers did not exibit this behavior.

Helping the students understand how they could receive assistance in completing their seatwork assignment was one of the more frequently observed behavior. Nine teachers frequently or sometimes explained to their students what to do if they needed help with their assignment.

We were also interested in whether or not these teachers informed their students about how to hand in their completed work. We were not going to judge the appropriateness of a procedure, such as is it better for the teacher to collect the work or the students to hand it in. All we wanted to find out is if the teacher told the students how to hand in work, assuming that by doing so the classroom would be more orderly and students would realize that the teacher wanted to see their completed assignment. Four of the teachers frequently told their students how to hand in their work. The remaining teachers, excluding teacher 3.1 who would sometimes do this, did not provide any information to their students for turning in completed work.

Student Behavior The focus of this category of observation was on whether students were working individually at their seats or in small groups. We were also interested in finding out whether or not students were given too little or too much time to complete seatwork activities. Teacher 3.2 had students working in both groups and their seats, the remaining eleven teachers had students working at their seats on independent tasks. All of the first grade students, except those in teacher 1.6 classroom, and students in teachers' classrooms 2.1, 2.2, and 3.3 were finished with their seatwork before the alloted time for completion. Students of teacher 1.6 were frequently not finished with their work in alloted time period. Teachers 2.3 and 3.1 were observed to allocate the correct amount of time for students to finish their seatwork, students were not observed in these classrooms to be finished before time was up nor not have enough time to complete their work.

Teacher Behavior Determining what the teacher does while students are completing seatwork activities was the focus of our observations for this category. Three teachers, 1.3, 2.2, and 3.3, went to the students at their seats if students needed help with an activity. Eight of the remaining nine teachers had the students come to them if they needed help. Teacher 3.2 infrequently assisted students who needed help, and when she did she went to them. Only teacher 3.1 was noted to call out the names of students while they worked independently. Teachers 1.6 and 2.3 infrequently called out the names of their students. The majority of these primary teachers had students turn-in their

work when they were finished.

Insert Table 1 Here

Summary and Discussion

Realizing that elementary students in the primary grades spend anywhere from 50 to 70 percent of their time working independently (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, Wilkinson, 1985; Rosenshine, 1979), it is important to promote quality seatwork time. Also, when one recalls the necessity of maintaining a high percentage of academic engaged time to insure mastery of basic reading skills, the matter of providing meaningful independent seatwork becomes of paramount interest.

With the teacher controlling the type and quality of independent seatwork, it is sensible to consult the literature to identify recommended procedures for teachers to follow. The following are recommendations from the literature (Durkin, 1983; Osborn, 1983; Rosenshine, 1979) for providing quality seatwork and for maintaining student engagement.

(1) Independent assignments should match learner needs.

(2) Directions and purposes for learning should be given both verbally and in writing.

(3) Initially, the teacher should go over the first few exercises with the students to help students' understand the task and the response mode.

(4) When the teacher is busy with other students there should be a predetermined method of handling students' questions and difficulties with the assignment.

(5) Seatwork tasks should be monitored and feedback given to individual students, if circumstances allow.

(6) Independent assignments should vary not only in the type of activity, but also in the type of grouping used (individual, small group).

(7) The purpose of seatwork tasks is to reinforce a skill taught in the lesson of the day or a previously taught lesson.

How did these twelve primary teachers compare to the above suggestions? Although many of the above mentioned procedures seem obvious, results of our observations suggest that teachers do not necessarily follow them.

Findings for the categories to whom seatwork was assigned and when it was assigned indicates that fifty percent of the teachers frequently gave the assignment to the whole class, which possibly suggests that seatwork is essentially a management device to keep the students quiet. In addition, these same teachers assigned seatwork before the reading lesson. This behavior can be interpreted to mean seatwork is used primarily as a "keep the students quiet" technique or as a means of reviewing previously taught lessons. The assignment of seatwork before the reading lesson may be justified in some situations. If the purpose of the seatwork task is to provide students with meaningful practice to reinforce a previously taught skill, then it fits under recommendation number seven. Reinforcement of skills taught earlier is an important feature of effective teaching. Independent completion of seatwork tasks that

reinforce past learning increases students' chances of being successful because it is a review and practice of what they have already learned.

It is interesting to note for "how assigned" that few teachers used written directions and not one teacher used an assignment sheet. The predominant method of making the assignment was verbal. This practice of little or no written directions is suprising in light of their importance in maintaining student engagement in learning. Recommendation number two states that directions for seatwork tasks should be given both verbally and illustrated in writing. Rather than just telling students to read and respond to a seatwork task, teachers can take a more active role in students learning by using written directions to help students also understand the thinking strategies they are to use. Slower students can frequently cope better in a classroom by using written instructions that contain both the thinking strategies and completed examples that illustrate for them how to complete a task. Furthermore, failure to use written directions is overlooking the opportunity to take advantage of "teaching moments." Written directions that use standard and predictable language structure would enable students to begin learning new words and highlight the communicative aspects of print.

Related directly to how assignments were made is the "assignment instructions for learning" category. The literature on providing quality reading instruction highlights the importance of giving students purposes for learning and

completing one or two practice examples with them. Six teachers gave purposes to their students for completing an activity and one teacher provided practice examples on a frequently occurring basis. These findings were not anticipated given the fact that considerable attention has been directed toward teachers helping students activate prior knowledge and strategies in completing reading tasks. Also, recent findings in teacher effectiveness research suggest that young students need to be successful 90% of the time while doing seatwork or workbook activities (Berliner, 1984). The use of practice examples is one way for teachers to be better assured that students understand how to complete the tasks and can complete them successfully (Heilman, Blair, & Rupley, 1986). Three subcategories of the assignment instructions section relate directly to classroom management. We assumed that if student's were given information about how much time they had to complete a task, how to get assistance if needed, and how to hand-in a completed activity there would be less "down time" and more academic learning time. We found, however, that teacher did not typically provide assignment instructions for these subcategories. A viable reason for teachers not demonstrating such behaviors could be due to when the observation were done. Since the teachers were observed in the Spring, the classroom routine was well established and giving such instructions may have been superfluous.

The category of "student behavior" yielded an interesting observation. All of the teachers required their students to work at their seats by themselves. At first glance, this predominance

of individuals working by themselves seems appropriate, especially in terms of maintaining an orderly classroom. However, teacher effectiveness research has revealed the positive aspects of having students occassionally work together in independent tasks. Indeed, the literature on cooperative learning supports the use of small groups to achieve desired results.

The last category of "teacher behavior" shows that four teachers circulated around the room to assist students who had questions. This observation is in direct contrast to findings that support the monitoring of seatwork to keep students attending to task and the use of practices to increase teacher availability. If students who are having problems either come to the teacher or are left alone the liklihood that they will distrupt other students who are academically engaged is increased. In addition, considerable time is wasted if students have to line-up to see the teacher and must wait to receive help. However, it must be acknowledged that at times circumstances are such that teachers cannot be readilly available to students working at their seats.

Although the above findings are valid only in describing the behaviors of the twelve primary teachers who were observed, they do highlight some areas of concern for primary teachers in the assignment and supervision of reading seatwork. Given the fact that a large percentage of the time primary students are engaged in independent seatwork type activities, teachers need to give greater attention to the assignment and supervision of such

activities. Providing students with meaningful purposes for learning, illustrating and practicing the assigned task with them, and supervising closely their success with the tasks are teaching strategies that will enhance the quality of independent learning for students.

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Table 1

Observation Results of Primary Teachers

Teacher	To Whom Assigned			When Assigned			How Assigned				Materials				Mat'l Foucs		Assignment Instructions For Learning							Student Behavior				Teacher Behavior				
	Individual	Group	Whole Class	Before Rdng. Lesson	After Rdng. Lesson	During Rdgn. Lesson	Verbally	Verbally With Illus.	Written Directive	Assignment Sheet	Workbook	Ditto Sheet/Commercial	Ditto Sheet/Teacher	Books/Basal-Trade	Word Attack	Comprehension	Purpose/Verbal Only	Purpose/Written	To Be Graded	Practice Examples	Time to Complete	Assistance if Needed	How to Hand-In	Working at Seats	Working in Groups	Finished Before Time	Not Finished in Time	Goes to Students	Calls Name of Students	Students go to Teacher	Collects Work	Students Turn In Work
1.1	0	0	●	●	0	0	0	●	0	0	0	●	0	0	0	●	*	●	*	*	●	●	●	●	0	●	0	0	0	●	0	●
1.2	0	0	●	●	0	0	0	0	●	0	●	*	0	0	●	●	0	●	0	0	0	●	0	●	0	●	0	0	0	●	0	●
1.3	0	*	*	*	0	*	●	0	0	0	*	*	*	0	●	●	●	0	●	0	0	*	0	●	0	●	0	●	0	0	*	0
1.4	0	●	0	*	0	*	●	0	0	0	*	*	*	0	●	●	●	0	●	0	0	*	0	●	0	●	0	0	0	●	0	●
1.5	0	0	●	●	0	0	●	0	0	0	0	●	●	0	●	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	●	0	●	0	0	0	●	0	●
1.6	0	0	●	●	0	0	●	0	0	0	0	●	●	0	●	0	0	0	●	0	0	0	0	●	0	●	0	0	*	●	0	●
2.1	0	●	0	0	●	0	0	0	0	0	●	*	0	0	●	●	●	0	●	0	*	*	0	●	0	●	0	0	0	●	0	●
2.2	0	0	●	●	0	0	0	●	0	0	●	0	0	●	●	●	0	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	0	●	0	0	0	0	0	●
2.3	0	0	●	●	0	0	*	*	0	0	0	●	0	*	●	0	*	0	0	0	0	0	●	●	0	0	0	●	0	*	0	0	0
3.1	0	●	0	0	*	●	●	0	0	0	*	*	0	0	●	0	0	0	●	0	●	●	●	●	0	0	0	0	●	*	0	0	●
3.2	0	●	0	0	0	●	●	0	0	0	●	0	0	0	*	*	0	0	0	0	0	●	●	●	*	0	*	0	0	0	0	●	●
3.3	0	●	0	0	0	●	0	●	0	0	●	0	0	●	0	●	0	0	0	0	0	●	●	●	0	●	0	0	0	●	*	0	●

Key: ● Frequent Behavior/Event (Observed 70% to 100%)
* Infrequent Behavior/Event (Observed 69% to 40%)
0 Absent Behavior/Event (Observed 39% to 0%)